

A Discussion and Application of the Parallel Curriculum Concept in Higher Education

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Presented by

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Abstract

An innovative way to add opportunities for the development of personal and professional competencies without adding any additional courses to a curriculum is to add individual assignments to already existing courses – a curriculum model presented in this paper as a *parallel curriculum* to the existing curriculum. The advantages of the parallel curriculum include (1) the use of existing courses to enhance additional learning; (2) the avoidance of adding the time and expense of additional courses; and (3) the extension of development of the identified competence over the life of the curriculum, taking advantage of reinforcement over time. This model requires that faculty become competent in teaching their students in the paralleled competence in addition to teaching in their primary discipline. The model that is presented is a description of a pilot project in the MA ED degree program in Human Resource Development (HRD) at Tusculum College, Tennessee.

Introduction

One dilemma inherent in the development and delivery of a degree-culminating curriculum is the limitation placed on the curriculum through time in the classroom and reasonable degree of course work assigned to a defined number of credits required for the degree. To limit the curriculum to too few courses, assignments, classroom time and learning experiences for most, if not all, curriculum designed to prepare students to practice in a professional area affects the quality of the program. However, faculty unfortunately do not have the luxury of including in a curriculum all they would like to

include. Too many class sessions, too many credit requirements, and more student workload than the course credit deems as reasonable increase program cost and time to completion, making the college program less attractive than those similar programs in competitor institutions. Yet, faculty often identify particular learning-outcome competencies that require additional instruction, practice and development; the traditional curriculum is often defined and limited to a reasonable number and sequence of credit hours or calendar time.

A parallel curriculum is an option as a curriculum model that permits the curriculum planning faculty to develop some identified competency across the curriculum, in select courses, to enhance students' professional development over time. There are some differences between the parallel curriculum concept and the "theme"-across-the-curriculum; e.g, writing or reading across the curriculum, that has been integrated in the elementary and secondary environments for some time with success.

This paper reviews the concept of the parallel curriculum, how it is used in a college graduate program in the Tusculum College School of Education, Graduate and Professional Studies curriculum, leading to the MA ED degree in Human Resource Development. The intent of the presentation is to showcase an innovative way to add learning and competency development within an existing curriculum without adding additional credits, hours or course time and related expenses to students.

The Parallel Curriculum Concept

The premise of the *parallel curriculum* is that curriculum integrates competency-focused learning activities into already existing courses to build that identified

competence. There is no need to add any additional courses; further, the parallel curriculum reinforces competence over the life of the curriculum as opposed to solely presenting that competency in one course. In effect, a separate curriculum, leading to some particular competency is placed “in parallel” and integrated into existing courses.

At Tusculum College, the Human Resource Development (HRD) graduate program faculty and students identified the need to develop students’ ability to recognize, value and respond effectively to diversity in personality types and preferences. However, at the same time, the faculty also valued students becoming more attuned to their own personal behaviors and their adaptations to become more influential when working with individuals and groups. The ability to influence individuals and groups is an inherent competency in human resource development consultant practice. The learning activities designed to help students develop these insights and skills were added as a separate curriculum, parallel to the existing curriculum.

The parallel curriculum differs from the “across the curriculum” practice in several significant ways. First, the working definition for curriculum in this model is that curriculum is a planned set of activities and experiences designed to engage students in acquiring some defined and established set of learning outcomes. Those defined and established sets of learning outcomes – also called learning goals and objectives in most college course syllabi – became the starting point for the development of the parallel curriculum. Secondly, the particular learning activities and experiences are supportive to already existing objectives of the respective courses to which the parallel activities are added. Consequently, the process of development of a parallel curriculum is predicated on an already well-defined and successful curriculum, the identification of particular

skills in the paralleled competency, the development of learning experiences and resources to help develop that paralleled competency, and the integration of those specific experiences into the right place in the existing curriculum.

This parallel curriculum model may sound, at first, like the familiar “reading across the curriculum” model in practice in elementary and secondary education. There is a significant difference. In the parallel curriculum, learning outcomes are identified and particular learning activities and resources planned as a separate curriculum at first; then they are placed within the existing curriculum, one activity per course. In the more traditional and practiced “across the curriculum concept”, for example, it may be possible for all faculty to assign a similar assignment such as reading or writing a paper in their respective courses with no variation of the theme. Writing or reading across the curriculum means that faculty will assign and evaluate writing and reading activities, with potential for additional instruction in writing or reading. In that case, faculty in other disciplines, e.g., math, biology, music, or history, who are qualified by education and experience to teach courses in their discipline, are now also instructing and evaluating in writing or reading. Their inclusion of writing or reading provides additional opportunities to practice these skills; and affords the faculty more opportunities to instruct and evaluate. Practice with feedback makes perfect. All faculty may assign a writing assignment or the use of the library to do additional reading. There may or *may not* be curriculum planning to the effect of ensuring that particular courses focus on the development of the particular identified competency. The inclusion of the activity itself, is sufficient to call a curriculum a “skill across the curriculum” model.

Another distinction with the parallel curriculum makes this model unique. The collection of learning activities assigned to individual courses could, theoretically, be collected and presented as a single course unto themselves. The intent is to avoid creating an additional course and the associated time and expense. But the collection of individual assignments, which were created as a set of distinct learning outcomes initially, could form a course with defined goals and objectives, with relevant learning activities and evaluation strategies.

Another example might be more illustrative. If Information Technology Across were the competency that a faculty identified as a valuable adjunct to their professional curriculum, then without using some of the unique concepts of the parallel curriculum, it would be possible that all faculty would assign students to submit a weekly assignment via e-mail attachment, or to prepare and present a graphic-supported presentation. Students are using technology developed across the curriculum. However, in the parallel curriculum concept, the particular skills in information technology are identified in advance; and they are assigned to support a particular course objective or build upon skills already acquired. Subsequently, each course would contain a different application of the identified competency.

In the truest sense, the parallel curriculum is predicated on the idea that the individual competencies and the learning activities associated with them are assigned in existing courses, and, if isolated and collected together, would become a course unto itself. The decision, however, is to avoid the addition of a course, and to extend practice and development of the competency over the life of curriculum rather than to retain that development within the confines of one time-limited course.

The Parallel Curriculum Development Process

The process for developing a parallel curriculum is defined by this sequence of actions:

- ◆ *A particular competency that is not part of the existing curriculum, but would enable students to develop valuable skills, is identified*
- ◆ *Learning outcomes are identified for the intended competence.*
- ◆ *Activities are developed to provide instruction in that competence, and to help students practice and achieve competence.*
- ◆ *Those activities are assigned to courses where they are most likely to support already existing course goals and objectives.*
- ◆ *The new competence is evaluated as part of the evaluation plan for the course.*
- ◆ *Competence is practiced and developed over the life of the curriculum.*

Within this model, there is limited or no duplication of assignments since individually identified and developed learning experiences are developed first; then they assigned “in parallel” to an existing course where that experience would support the goals and objectives of that course.

An Application: DiSC ® Personality Profile System in the Curriculum

To develop the competency of influencing skills, the faculty in the HRD Concentration at Tusculum opted to add learning experiences to the already existing curriculum. The basis for these assignments was to first engage students in a study of diverse personality types so they would acquire an appreciation of their own manner of working with others, the presentation of alternatives in individual behavior habits and preferences, and the need to become respectful of and adaptive to those alternatives in

individual behavior so they may be more influential when working in organizational development.

DiSC ® is a widely used, valid and reliable personality profile instrument, owned by InScape Publishing, and distributed by individually qualified distributors as part of their organizational development practice, that profiles how individuals prefer to relate to others in terms of leadership, pursuing and completing work, interpersonal relationships and communication approaches. DiSC Personality Profile Class Plus 2 was the version used for this curriculum. (InScape Publishing.)

The DiSC personality system was selected because it is currently valued and widely used in organizational development activities in many types of organizations. The use of this particular instrument would also provide graduates with some familiarity with the instrument should they choose to acquire certification in its use; or to distribute it as a service in their professional practice in human resource development.

Understanding the four personality types profiled by DiSC should help explain the use of this instrument in the development of the parallel curriculum. The four personality types briefly defined in the DiSC model include:

Directing – One who displays a need to give directions, direct work as they wish it to be done; have their way; be in charge, determine if completed work is done to a satisfactory quality. The D personality focuses on work productivity, following rules and procedures, and accomplishment.

Influencing -- One who enjoys bringing ideas and plans to a group, and being recognized for their leadership, contribution, and success. Personal relationships with people are important; they enjoy conversation before performing work.

Steadfastness-- One who values friendly and harmonious relationships with others, wants to build a sense of trust among people who work together; and works to resolve conflict. Keeping all on an even keel is important to the S personality before work can be approached.

Conscientiousness -- One who values quality, accuracy and correctness. Needs to follow rules, procedures, and requirements. Needs details, facts, and has a low tolerance for ambiguity. The C personality cannot proceed with work unless all unanswered questions are answered. There can be no surprises.

Students take the DiSC Plus 2 instrument in the first course-- HRDE 501: The HRD Profession -- to obtain some information about themselves and other types. They receive a 55 page summary of their preferences in such areas as approaches to communication, completing work, management and supervision styles, dealing with conflict, and areas of difficulty in relating to persons who are different from their own personality style. Group and individual assignments using the results of the DiSC assessment are incorporated into seven courses to parallel the existing HRD curriculum. Subsequently, there are individual or learning team dynamics assignments in seven courses throughout the curriculum in which students use what they learned about themselves and the DiSC types in general to gain additional insight about how people relate and communicate. The learning team, generally three to four students who work out of the scheduled class each week on course assignments, becomes a micro learning laboratory for the study of group diversity, behavior, leadership, motivation, conflict, communication, and other dynamic of individual and groups behavior.

Human Resource Development Curriculum

This parallel curriculum is used in a 36 credit graduate program leading to the MA ED degree from Tusculum College in the Human Resource Development (HRD) concentration. HRD is a multidisciplinary profession that uses models, theories, and tools to help individuals, groups, and organizations work more effectively. The curriculum was developed from the roles, responsibilities and competencies of the American Society for Training and Development. (ASTD). HRD comprises several functional areas, including Strategic Planning; Project Management; Training, Education and Professional Development; Organizational Communication, Research and Behavior; Team Leadership and Behavior; and Organizational Culture. The ability to work with a variety of personality styles and preferences is central to being successful in organizational consultant practice.

The particular insights into human behavior that were considered important by a faculty curriculum committee were assigned to respective courses; and particular assignments were developed to engage students into learning more about human behavior. A summary of that parallel curriculum is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Parallel DiSC Curriculum in the HRD Curriculum -Tusculum College

Course	Intended Learning Outcome	Learning Activity Using DiSC
The HRD Profession	Developing teams based upon diverse personalities	Learning teams members compare and contrast their personalities types; identify strengths each member brings to the team; identifies areas for potential conflict; negotiates and agrees to a team agreement for inclusion.

The Adult Learner	Addressing the variety of ways that adults may prefer to learn	Compare and contract DiSC descriptions with other theories and learning styles; develop alternative ways to engage persons of various types to learn.
Organizational Planning and Advancement	Develop the ability to people read as a method to analyze group dynamics for group development.	Listen and observe a meeting of individuals; note differences in behaviors; “read” personalities; assess the group’s dynamics; identify areas to make the group more effective.
Organizational Leadership	Recognize the leadership behavior of each of the DiSC styles; identify ways that individual DiSC types can develop their leadership abilities.	Describe the leadership behaviors of a known leader; “read” the personality type; assess if that leadership type is strategically supportive of that organization’s mission; identify opportunities for leadership development for that leader to complement their preferred style.
Facilitating Groups	Adapt and develop facilitation skills to be more effective with different personality types.	Plan and demonstrate how to facilitate a meeting for each of the DiSC types.
HRD Consultant Project	Respond to the communication and work practices preferences of an organizational client	“People read” and “culture read” the organizational culture and client. Using the DiSC materials, develop a strategy to be more successful in relating to the client’s preference for communication and work accomplishment.
Organizational Behavior	Compare and contract management practices for various personality types	Using the DiSC report, develop a strategy for managing each of the DiSC personality types to be most helpful and motivational.

Accomplishments and Evaluations

The DiSC Parallel Curriculum project is in pilot stage at Tusculum before a decision is made to make the curriculum concept permanent, to make modifications, and to consider this concept for other degree-culminating programs. On-going end-of-course evaluations report that students are excited about the opportunities to learn more about themselves and others as a part of the graduate, professional education. Preliminary data

suggest that most students are placed a very high perceptions of the value of these exercises, feel that they will be more personally effective in their working and personal relationships with others; and feel that they are obtaining value from the additional expense of the assessment and report. Few students commented on the additional expense for the additional assignment in the first course; and they did not recognize that the expense is for materials that will be used over the 19 month curriculum in many courses. Some students come to the HRD program with significant experience in personality style assessments, and some are already DiSC certified themselves. Their reports are less positive for themselves; but they indicate that the curriculum is valuable for others.

Faculty are provided the liberty to develop the particular assignment to achieve the intended learning outcome; they understand the need to adhere to the curriculum plan to avoid duplication of assignments and an error of omission resulting in a missed opportunity for learning. Most faculty are reporting a reasonable degree of comfort in using the DiSC materials to guide student learning experiences.

Some Issues to be Resolved

One emerging issue is evident in the parallel curriculum. Faculty, who are selected and contracted on an adjunct basis to teach courses in a discipline for which they give evidence of the required level of experience and education are now asked to teach and evaluate students using a tool that most are not using in their professional practice. An assumption – possibly an incorrect or premature one – was that faculty who work with and practice in various functions of human resource development and behavior

would be comfortable using another personality assessment tool. A reasonable amount of reading materials was provided to each adjunct professor; and additional materials were provided in the learning resource center. Based upon initial experiences, some faculty may need more time and practice is using the DiSC personality type report information, and in learning how to implement their particular activity into their course. Faculty were provided with on-line access to take the DiSC profile themselves for the personal experience and for their own 55 page report. Additional discussions among faculty will determine how to shorten the learning curve to their level of satisfaction. The need for faculty development becomes more complicated with faculty who are contracted on an adjunct basis; and no financial support is provided for their professional development, requiring their participation to be voluntary.

Other Applications

This paper describes the concept of the parallel curriculum as a way of incorporating development of a defined and desired competency among students over the life of the curriculum without the additional time and associate costs of the addition of more courses. The parallel curriculum offers the additional advantage of skill-building and reinforcement over time that anchors learning and application. The use of the DiSC personality profile system was used to illustrate a practiced example of how Tusculum College incorporated learning about human behavior and personal adaptations to be more effective in working with others. While the ability to become more influential in working with diverse individuals and groups was the identified competency for this pilot, other competencies may be appropriate to consider.

Information Literacy is a competency coined by library science professionals to describe the ability of individuals to locate information, given the enhanced accessibility to many research databases that now form the college library's ability to increase resources for students without increased need for floor and shelf space. The collaborative role of the librarian in this parallel curriculum is central to the success of this curriculum. (Lindstrom and Shonrock, 2006; Rockman, Ilene F. & Associates, 2005). Generally, graduate-degreed librarians assist students in identifying the most helpful databases to support their need for resources to support an assignment. However, they now state that students' ability to use these information resources independently should be practiced over the curriculum to empower students to complete information searches as a valuable professional and lifelong skill. The faculty perspective and contribution to helping students acquire the competency of information literacy is to focus students' abilities to discern information that is easy to find; and to make rational decisions about whether that information is credible. This practice recognized that not all information in print is credible, but may be biased or incorrect. Information literacy assignments planned in parallel to an existing curriculum might include locating current statistics about a particular topic; locating and using government documents; locating and summarizing empirical research reports; locating credible websites that may become part of a professional e-library; locating books, including e-books on a topic; finding biographies and other literature reviews; and touring an art gallery and other points of interest as some examples. Research has shown that development of sufficient information literacy requires repeated opportunities to explore the independent use of the library with technology support. (Rockman and Associates, 2004).

Information Technology as a parallel curriculum competency would engage students in developing more professional abilities to use computer-based support to find, use and present information in more interesting and accessible ways. Example skills would be to create a website on a topic related to the course; develop and maintain an electronic library or resources for the course; import web-based information to presentation graphics; using electronic publishing software to create marketing or informational materials such as a brochure or a poster; importing video and audio files into presentations; using Microsoft Access and Excel to organize and sort files of information. Each of these assignments could be implemented in many course, including music and art, physical and social sciences, the humanities, and communication skills courses. (Roberts, Kelley and Medlin, 2007).

Ethics, Morality and Civility has become an interesting overall competency to some college curriculum missions. Their intent is to acknowledge that the college curriculum is not only to prepare and enable graduates to enter the workforce with discrete skills and abilities to problem solve and make decisions; but graduates will provide their contributions to society with consideration to what is the ethically and morally right thing to do. The college or school mission values the integration of natural, moral and ethical law with civil law. Inherent in this parallel competency is the consideration of ethical issues that include human rights, freedom, abuse, poverty, life-related issues, ecological and other global concerns, and civic responsibility in the college classroom as well as the community classroom. As an example, Ave Maria University School of Law in Naples, Florida is a Catholic university that recognizes that law, ethics and morality are inherently intertwined. In both required and elective courses, students are encouraged to

consider how the unchanging moral imperatives of the natural law should affect a lawyer's approach to the practice of law. This approach to the study of law provides students with a deep appreciation for the origins of law and an understanding of moral and intellectual principles germane to the American legal system, including unalienable rights, federalism, and separation of powers. Faculty members address and explore moral and ethical issues within substantive law courses. (Ave Maria University School of Law Mission Statement).

Other Research and Professional References

A search of the literature finds no mention of the term of the *parallel curriculum*. The term is unique, although it may be in practice under other labels. Writing, reading and speaking "across the curriculum" are substantially reported in the professional literature; however, the majority of those reports come from the primary and secondary education areas. When used with adult learners, writing, reading and public speaking are referenced in programs in adult basic education, general education diploma programs, and English as a second language. Other applications are described using the same concept. The parallel curriculum concept has been used to embed physical fitness and health-related instruction into K -12 Curriculum. (Ayers and Martinez, 2007). Leadership development was planned across the curriculum in a nursing program with great results. (Munro and Russell, 2007). In another nursing program to help nursing students develop critical thinking skills, the problem-based learning approach was developed across the curriculum. (McLaughlin and Darvill), 2007). As a means to

attract college students to some courses, themes in the popular Harry Potter novels and movies were incorporated into existing college courses. (Millman, 2007)

Few professional competencies, other than the example from Ave Maria University School of Law, are not reported.

Conclusion

One of the challenges to effective curriculum development is to acknowledge that there is never enough time to address all we would care to address with students. Some basic personal competencies support students' abilities to continue their own learning or work more effectively. Without adding additional courses, practice in desirable interpersonal, communication, and information skills can added in parallel to existing courses to take advantage of time as a reinforcement to learning, and to avoid additional time and expense to students in the pursuit of a degree. Faculty are challenged to develop their own competencies in these areas to be more supportive of student learning.

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